

*The Natural Philosopher Returns,
Singing*

Roald Hoffmann

THE NATURAL PHILOSOPHER never left. But he (and she) lost his way. No wonder—it was getting awfully dark, the smog and stink of the industrial revolution coming down over the Midlands, and there were all these distracting wild noises, romanticism beating its chest. So part of the natural philosopher went this-a-way—into the scientist’s seductive and productive play with quality and quantity. And part went that-a-way—in the poet’s principled turn of nature into a willing (or conscripted) mirror for the self.

Could one say “too bad,” when what was granted us after separation was 175 years of glorious poetry? And the greatest explosion of reliable knowledge of the innards of the beast that humanity has ever seen—this the scientist’s boon? Yes, I would say “too bad,” for they could have moseyed through the beautiful and terrible landscape of the twentieth century together. As it is, we have had to wait that long for a natural to return, to hold hands with both, for A. R. Ammons.

I read “natural philosopher” in at least three ways: First, *natural* philosopher—in the sense that the poet’s use of language, as

forethought and Promethean it be (and “forethought” is what the Titan’s name means), is natural. What comes easy to Ammons, comes over easy also to us. His poems are not hermetic, and they touch us immediately. Their sagacity is direct. Even his neologisms have the feel of smooth stones, as if they’ve lain around that creek an eon or two.

Second, Ammons is a natural *philosopher*. His métier is thinking, his mode is contemplative. He talks to us, with us. There is in his stance a standing apart (but hardly one that excludes us), and there is an entering. There is concentration. There is a hunt, a truffle hunt, for essences.

Ammons is a *natural philosopher*, now both words given their equipoise. His search, gentle yet insistent, is for a philosophy of nature—a metaphysics always, an epistemology of openness to the connectedness of things and ideas, its inherent logic, an aesthetics rooted in the wonder of it all, and reinforced by the purposive harmony of his poems, an ethics, even an eschatology of the very real world.

Let me read a poem of Archie Ammons with you, in this light.

The Spiral Rag

Opposites attracting could easing jar to a strandrill
or unmoderated blast into mutual annihilation’s O; or,
just at the meeting node, veer around each other,

the momentum transforming into spin which would, of
course, generate a whirlpool flow-through, so that the
energies undemolished and still current could find a

place where, slowed, they could give up their terrible
shapes and tendencies and dissipate into the continuum
from which they might eventually return: anyway, the

circle won't do, except as an infinitely extensible outer boundary: also, the sphere won't do, for some reason I've forgotten (no transfusing discharge) just surface extension with only surface flow: but the vortex will come close to doing because it gives a standing-motion shape at the central interior so that high formations finding each other have a way to go: the truest motion's truest shape's the spiral's inward arc, the inward turning whirl that promotes a direction for the meeting that can wear down or fly apart somewhere past the tightening screw's whirl: whatever, what a mechanism for averting, for taking in, changing, and giving out, for holding still while the motion flies! the mind figures but even though it wants to do well never comes up with the source of what it comes up with.

(Lake Effect Country 7)

This is about as scientific a poem as Ammons will give us. The science is that of vortices—structures ranging from the mundane whirlpool in your flushing toilet to black holes. I have seen the partial differential equations that describe vortices—and they do not tell me as much as this poem does.

What Ammons describes as “momentum transforming into spin” actually corresponds to one way these equations are conceptually set up. But I am as disinterested in finding those equations in the poem as I am in the Bible anticipating modern science. No, it is essence we crave, and this the poet gives us—he captures the fact that a vortex is more than a spirally shape. It is a mass transport device, for “taking in, changing, and / giving out.” Still more interesting is the dazzling craftsmanship (one of the

symptomatic links of good art and good science) of this poem. Like room-temperature butter on bread fresh out of the oven, the workmanship is spread gently, even diffidently. But who else can get away with dangling articles at the end of a line or a stanza? And who can *use* that risky device (the same dangling articles) here to take us past the stop of a line break, there emphasize the break, through the break between article and noun?

We not only read about a vortex, we are made to fly in and out of it, we read faster when Ammons wants us to, we read slower. The simplicity and sophistication of the poet's devices here are astounding. Have commas ever felt heavier than those around “, slowed,”? Ammons is especially masterful at making us walk the tightrope of syntax. So the ambiguity between possessive and contraction (with *is*), and the curiosity of learning what the heck is possessing what are played out within “the truest motion's truest shape's the spiral's inward arc” to make us accelerate to warp speed right there.

I've said the craftsmanship is dazzling. But Ammons also takes steps to deflect us from his mastery, indeed to downplay it. I take the conversational tone of the poem in this way, his diffident sharing with us that he has forgotten something, or the “whatever.” Are these rhetorical strategies, just to hit us with the salient stopping comment of the mind at the end of the poem? I don't think that's all, for I see in Ammons's gambit a parallel to science I like—not the science of the market, of implicit claims to hyper-rationality hyped with a phrase such as “the unprecedented synthesis of a novel conducting polymer by molecular engineering,” but the science that lets creation speak for itself, and that speech gives space to the mind to reflect on the ingenuity and labor of the human artificer.

THE FIGURE OF THE whirlwind rises in many of Ammons's poems. I cite but two:

Bottommost

We circle the sinkhole
the coil spins in:
when the speed is close and sufficient,
a tube of nothingness
opens down which
attracted objects mill exodus.

(*Really Short Poems* 65)

and

Planes

The whirlwind lifts
sand to
hide holy
spun
emptiness or erect a
tall announcement
where formed
emptiness is to be found

(*Worldly Hopes* 44)

The first poem includes a “we” that is pretty unusual in an Ammons poem. Part of the philosophical distance, the contemplative stance, is achieved by eschewing the overly personal. The “I” is most certainly there, but think about how different, how less bombastic but no less effective in drawing us in, that “I” is in Ammons compared to, say, Whitman.

These poems move from whirlpools and dark holes to whirlwinds, if not tornadoes. The figure is natural, but the questions are deeply metaphysical: How is nothingness to be defined? How are we to reconcile one of the essential tensions, the quietude sculpted by impelled motion?

The whirlwind or a tempest is the place to ask important questions. It is the locus from which the Lord asks Job: "Who put wisdom in the hidden parts?"

"Planes" also reveals another characteristic of great poetry that Ammons masters naturally. I will call it clumsily "heightening by backtracking" or "turning back to climb higher" or "reverse resonance." Look at the "holy" in line 3 of "Planes." It carries the weight of ambiguity of holiness of the sacred type or just the quality of having holes, plus the third enriching acrophonic relation to wholeness; as we puzzle out whether Ammons is getting religious, the "emptiness" bounces us back. "Holy" becomes the center; the poem caroms back and forth around that word, like a laser beam amplified by mirrors.

That reflection is explicit in another beautiful little poem, "Reflective":

I found a
weed
that had a
mirror in it
and that
mirror
looked in at
a mirror
in
me that
had a
weed in it

(*Collected Poems* 170)

The weeds and mirrors are reflected; the beginning and end, and the incredible focus on a small two-letter word "in." "Reflective"

tive," as well as some of Ammon's other poems, do an American turn on Descartes. The natural philosopher is because he thinks, but he thinks because he senses the real world of a dewdrop in a weed, which *is*. Note how deftly this little poem sashays around Bishop Berkeley's ontological dilemma—you don't have the slightest doubt of the existence, forever and ever, of either weed or observer, do you? And each is enriched by being mirrored in the other. What might have been a stumbling into a dismal corridor of endless mirrors becomes a reconciliation of two seemingly disparate pieces of the world. How soft these mirrors are, how they humanize the harsher mirrors we look into each day!

I think this is the best poem in the English language written in words of no more than six letters. And without adjectives.

These poems are so much more than cleverness, they are deeply philosophical. Their span is cosmic, from weed to universe, and their philosophic range commensurably immense. Take "Substantial Planes": An epistemological question is asked, about the meaning of poetry—asked, even if it is distanced from the poet, who will dismiss it. The query is answered by a deft deflection that is metaphysical. Human beings create the foundation, call it worry, from which poetry will surely rise like a mad vine.

The one philosophical element that I feel Archie Ammon's poems lack is that of teleology. I do not bemoan this—the universe, from piddling puddles to reeds, weeds, and galaxies is *accepted*. By him, for us. Indeed, what reason need there be for what is so wondrously with us, replete with its natural intricacies, splintered into a million shards of meaning by human construction, shifting floors, the solid floor? To paraphrase a repeated phrase in the Passover service: "Dayenu"—It suffices.

I see here an interesting difference from that other great natural philosopher poet, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. Goethe's reached as far as Ammons, from the smallest to the immense. Goethe was different, of course. He gave names to his gods of nature, and as his nature ran its effulgent course, we could only

hold our breath in wonder as we read him, as untranslatable as he is.

What is different about Goethe is that teleology matters to him. There is no easy acceptance of a multivalent universe; if Goethe had an idea about the existence of an ur-plant, and an evolutionary mechanism of metamorphoses, then woe for other notions; he writes a poem of the metamorphosis of plants to convince us that the world is the way he wants it to be.

For fun, compare two poems on a similar theme by Ammons and by Goethe:

The Time Rate of Change

You mosey around, idling here and
there for years,
unaware that a waiting is hanging

out for you, and then one day
you feel a light hindrance
like a floating, cut-away spider web

touch your shoulder: and some
years later, perhaps, another,
still light but with a smallish

tug to it, and then one day you
trip and catch in an entanglement like
direction, but the direction is

rope-loose and you don't mind that
much: more years and a fine halter
of dense constraints bites in,

and a kind of speed breaks out,
not just speed but acceleration, and
you begin to look back and also,

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and with equal alarm, forward,
and the speed picks up, the direction
narrows, and the speed is light's.

(*Brink Road 17*)

and Goethe:

Die Jahre

Die Jahre sind allerliebste Leut:
Sie brachten gestern, sie bringen heut,
Und so verbringen wir Jüngern eben
Das allerliebste Scharaffen-Leben.
Und dann fällt's den Jahren auf einmal ein,
Nicht mehr, wie sonst, bequem zu sein;
Wollen nicht mehr schenken, wollen nicht mehr borgen,
Sie nehmen heute, sie nehmen morgen.

(1814)

The Years

The years? A charming lot, I say.
Brought presents yesterday, bring presents today,
And so we younger ones maintain
The charming life that's led in Cockayne.
Then all of a sudden the years change their mind,
Are no longer obliging, no longer kind;
Won't give you presents, won't let you borrow,
Dun you today, and rob you tomorrow.

(*translated by Michael Hamburger*)

Let me return to Ammons. The philosopher *returns*. He comes back, shuffling along, and he rings the changes on the only words we have, on that evanescent but mind-brick-hard

floor. The natural philosopher is *peripatetic*, and Aristotelian like the Aristotle of “*Historia Animalium*,” the one who could describe a murex sea snail in sufficient detail for us to reconstruct the Tyrian purple industry. Ammons’s poems are suffused by a sense of entering—as in his great “Corsons Inlet”—and returning. As in the early “Hymn”:

Hymn

I know if I find you I will have to leave the earth
and go on out
 over the sea marshes and the brant in bays
and over the hills of tall hickory
and over the crater lakes and canyons
and on up through the spheres of diminishing air
past the blackset noctilucous clouds
 where one wants to stop and look
way past all the light diffusions and bombardments
up farther than the loss of sight
into the unseasonal undifferentiated empty stark

And I know if I find you I will have to stay with the earth
inspecting with thin tools and ground eyes
trusting the microvilli sporangia and simplest
 coelenterates
and praying for a nerve cell
with all the soul of my chemical reactions
and going right on down where the eye sees only traces

You are everywhere partial and entire
You are on the inside of everything and on the outside

I walk down the path down the hill where the sweetgum
has begun to ooze spring sap at the cut

and I see how the bark cracks and winds like no other bark
chasmal to my ant-soul running up and down
and if I find you I must go out deep into your
far resolutions
and if I find you I must stay here with the separate leaves

(*Collected Poems* 39)

There is a you in this poem. But it is Nature, of course, hardly the you of most contemporary poems. And yet—it is you. There are poems of nature, wonderful, evocative poems. But somehow none today dares to address Nature with the hunger of incipient knowledge, with the joy for the contents of its cornucopia in the way early Ammons did.

The natural philosopher returns, *singing*. Curiously, A. R. Ammons's song in my mind absolutely resists musical setting (unlike Goethe, the singer who can be sung). The ample melody and counterpoint of Ammons's poetry turns those dangling articles into syncopations, works a prosaic turn such as "Spiral Rag's" "for some reason / I've forgotten (no transfusing discharge) just surface / extension with only surface flow . . ." into a riff that has much akin with João Gilberto's "Samba duma nota" ("One Note Samba"). What rhythm, what verve, what song in the deceptively gentle register!

And why does the natural philosopher sing? I'll let him tell us.

Singing & Doubling Together

My nature singing in me is your nature singing:
you have means to veer down, filter through,
and, coming in,
harden into vines that break back with leaves,
so that when the wind stirs
I know you are there and I hear you in leafspeech,

though of course back into your heightenings I
can never follow: you are there beyond
tracings flesh can take,
and farther away surrounding and informing the systems,
you are as if nothing, and
where you are least knowable I celebrate you most

or here most when near dusk the pheasant squawks and
lofts at a sharp angle to the roost cedar,
I catch in the angle of that ascent,
in the justness of that event your pheasant nature,
and when dusk settles, the bushes creak and
snap in their natures with your creaking

and snapping nature: I catch the impact and turn
it back: cut the grass and pick up branches
under the elm, rise to the several tenderesses
and griefs, and you will fail me only as from the still
of your great high otherness you fail all things,
somewhere to lift things up, if not those things again:

even you risked all the way into the taking on of shape
and time fail and fail with me, as me,
and going hence with me know the going hence
and in the cries of that pain it is you crying and
you know of it and it is my pain, my tears, my loss—
what but grace

have I to bear in every motion,
embracing or turning away, staggering or standing still,
while your settled kingdom sways in the distillations of light
and plunders down into the darkness with me
and comes nowhere up again but changed into your
singing nature when I need sing my nature nevermore.

(Lake Effect Country 42-43)

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What is there left to say about the poetry of A. R. Ammons?
Oh, just an infinitude of infinitesimals. That small things matter.
And the startling claims of the *the*. Through the way of the *the*
Ammons celebrates earthy communion with the insistently par-
ticular particulate infinity of—poems, of this world, of no other
one. A world worthy of song.